

LIBRARIES IN THE WORKPLACE: THE UK SPECIAL LIBRARY STATISTICS EXPERIENCE*

By David Spiller

Abstract: The paper describes three recent pieces of research into UK workplace libraries. Problems in surveying this sector are described - particularly the difficulties of identifying and defining workplace libraries, and the poor return of questionnaires. The paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of different methodologies, and ways of presenting the data; also, procedures for grossing up data to achieve all-sector totals, and comparisons between sectors. These points are illustrated with examples. Also briefly mentioned is a telephone survey of the contribution of workplace libraries to employee development.

Introduction

Special libraries in the United Kingdom are - along with school libraries - the section of the library and information world about which least is known. This situation is characteristic of many countries outside the United States. Even the term 'special libraries' - though generally understood - is indistinct, defining what is *not* represented (public, academic or school libraries), rather than what *is*. In the UK, it is gradually being replaced by the expression 'libraries in the workplace', which covers all services in commercial, governmental and quasi-governmental bodies that provide information to advance the goals of their organisations. I use the term 'workplace libraries' below - and also use 'library' as shorthand for 'library/information services'.

The lack of focus in 'workplace' libraries is inherent, because of the wide divergence in their size, subject matter and type, and the natural reluctance of commercial organisations to publicise information about their activities. This is a pity. The economic importance of these institutions, and the central role of information to their work, mean that an overview of workplace libraries is important to any developed country. It is also keenly sought by suppliers of materials and electronic resources, equipment, training and education. And managers of the institutions themselves, together with their library specialists,

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should not opt out of the national and international trends towards benchmarking library performance.

I assume the audience here will be more interested in the methodology of surveying workplace libraries than in the actual details of the UK scene. I have therefore concentrated my talk on the difficulties of surveying the sector, the various approaches taken in the UK, and the methodologies which have proved effective - and have used only occasional examples from the findings.

Recent UK work

Three major surveys of UK workplace libraries have been carried out in the past five years:

1. *UK special library statistics*¹, by Pamela Berridge and John Sumsion, was a survey of the statistics on special libraries that existed at the time of publication (1994), funded by the British Library Research and Innovation Centre. The exercise was important in preparing the way for subsequent surveys. In countries where the subject of special libraries is being addressed for the first time, this form of mapping approach may be the ideal start.
2. *TFPL survey of UK special library statistics*², by Claire Creaser and David Spiller, took advantage of information collected in 1994 and 1996 by the prominent UK information consultants, TFPL.
3. *Libraries in the workplace*³, also funded by the British Library Research and Innovation Centre, was published in August 1998: a random survey of ten special library sectors, which builds upon the findings of the TFPL survey - particularly in the areas of performance and the use of electronic media.

Problems

Definition Surveys of workplace libraries usually encounter serious problems of identification and definition. Which libraries are to be included? How are the different sectors to be defined - so that like services can be compared with like? How should individual libraries be allocated to these sectors?

¹ Berridge, Pamela J & Sumsion, J. *UK special library statistics*, ISBN 0 948848 64 2, Loughborough: LISU, 1994.

² Creaser, Claire & Spiller, D J. *TFPL survey of special library statistics*, ISBN 0 948848 93 6, Loughborough: LISU, 1997.

³ *Libraries in the workplace*. LISU project in progress, publication Summer 1998.

Workplace libraries are rarely as well mapped as their academic and public counterparts, and directories that do exist are rarely comprehensive. Amongst the sources that we have found useful as sampling frames for the projects mentioned above are:

- Published directories of libraries and information services, and/or their parent organisations
- Membership lists of associations of information professionals
- Sectoral groups of librarians, both formal and informal (eg the City Information Group, the Regional Librarians Group of the National Health Service)
- Mailing lists of information consultants and suppliers (often only accessible on payment of a fee).

In relation to the definition of sectors, the classification devised by Pamela Berridge, and used for the first two LISU publications mentioned above, has proved a workable system. The categories are:

Commercial/industrial

Pharmaceutical
 chemical & plastics
 energy
 machinery manufacturers
 miscellaneous manufacturers
 financial
 legal
 information consultants
 media/publishing

Non-commercial

central government
 local government
 health
 museums
 voluntary organisations
 professional associations

In the UK, the Department of Trade and Industry’s ‘Standard Industrial Classification’ is helpful for eliminating much of the potential cross-classification, and for allocating institutions to agreed sectors. Even so, certain institutions obstinately resist easy allocation. The borderline between ‘commercial’ and ‘non-commercial’ becomes increasingly indistinct, as organisations which were 100% government-funded are obliged to diversify their sources of funding. Research libraries are often difficult to classify for this reason.

Returns A recent paper by Eberhard Janke⁴ lamented that it was difficult to achieve returns of more than 35% in surveys of German special libraries. That

⁴ Deutsche Bibliotheksstatistik. Revising the German special library statistics: a quantity to quality initiative, Discussion paper for the European workshop for suppliers and users of library statistics, Luxembourg, 9/10 December 1997. See also: INSPEL 31(1997)4

experience is echoed in UK surveys. One reason for it is the difficulty of getting postal questionnaires to the right department of the organisation. The different terminologies used (library, information unit, resource centre, research, documentation centre) do not help. Telephone chasing of postal questionnaires is essential, and often establishes - if the right person *can* be tracked down - that the original questionnaire never reached its mark. For short questionnaires it may be worth doing the whole survey by telephone.

Of course, a questionnaire about library/information services is unlikely to be completed if the recipient organisation does not *have* a library. This can only be determined - if at all - by telephone chasing. In the *Libraries in the workplace* random survey, 14% of the 897 organisations contacted said they had no library - 17% if we include libraries reported as "too small to be worth surveying". Twenty-seven per cent of voluntary sector organisations contacted had no library, and 60% of food manufacturing organisations - a response which suggested the need for a completely different survey about the nature of information gathering in manufacturing industries. The full picture is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Response rate

Code	Sector	Forms sent out	Forms returned	Response rate	No lib	Response rate
1	Govt Dept	29	17	58.6	0	0
2	Govt Non-Dept	96	44	45.8	2	2.1
3	Voluntary	98	26	26.5	26	26.5
4	Trade Assoc	101	50	49.5	4	4.0
5	Law	90	23	25.6	8	8.9
6	Comm & Fin	99	24	24.2	11	11.1
7	Energy	90	33	36.7	7	7.8
8	Pharma	97	32	33.0	3	3.1
9	Man & Info Cons	100	33	33.0	9	9.0
10	Food Manu	97	3	3.1	58	59.8
Total		897	285	31.8	128	14.2

There are other probable reasons for poor returns:

- Libraries in commercial organisations are understandably reluctant to provide confidential information which might be of use to their competitors. For this reason surveys are best conducted from outside the sector - by organisations with a reputation for not revealing sources.
- There is no tradition of benchmarking amongst workplace libraries - despite its strong presence in their parent companies.
- In many workplace libraries there are only one or two hard-pressed members of staff, for whom the receipt of a questionnaire is not a cause for rejoicing.

- Special librarians may also feel that the added value they give, by packaging or interpreting information for their users, cannot easily be addressed by a questionnaire - and on this point they are probably right.

Methodologies

The different approaches taken in the TFPL survey⁵ and in *Libraries in the workplace*⁶ can be instructive. TFPL had the idea of including a statistics questionnaire along with the professional/biographical questionnaire distributed to all those mailed for their publication *Who's who in the UK information world*⁷. The impressive number of statistical responses received - 1,076 in 1994 and 772 in 1996 - was a function of this approach, and also of an impressively *short* questionnaire - squeezed onto a single page.

The *Libraries in the workplace survey*⁶ is restricted to ten specified sectors. Respondents were selected through a simple random sample, drawn from a different sampling frame for each sector. The questionnaire was longer (four pages), and the initial response much lower: 150 questionnaires, or 15% of the sample - increasing to 28% following telephone chasing.

Despite these differences of approach, the findings were largely comparable. Where there were variations, they were usually explicable. For instance, the self-selection approach of the TFPL survey naturally led to responses being received from organisations where a well developed library was known to exist. The random sample of organisations in *Libraries in the workplace* discovered additional information about organisations where there was no library, or where the library/information facility was very small - and many of the findings showed correspondingly lower averages.

Another difference was the form in which quantitative information (about budgets, stock, acquisitions, etc) was requested. The TFPL survey used a bracket approach, asking respondents to tick one of five or six boxes representing different ranges of figures. This was probably a factor in eliciting a high response - particularly in sensitive areas such as budgets. But in devising the questionnaire, it is easy to guesstimate the prompted ranges unhelpfully, both at lower levels and higher (when a prompted option of '£5,000+' can conceal figures of £5,000 or

⁵ Creaser, Claire & Spiller, D J. *TFPL survey of special library statistics*, ISBN 0 948848 93 6, Loughborough: LISU, 1997.

⁶ *Libraries in the workplace*. LISU project in progress, publication Summer 1998.

⁷ Nordin, Jorund B, ed. *Who's who in the UK information world*, 6th ed. 1997, London: TFPL, 1997.

£50,000). *Libraries in the workplace* requested specific figures - more accurate, if forthcoming.

However it is gathered, the quantitative information needs careful analysis. The variations in responses tend to be much greater than they are in other library/information sectors, and almost every sector was characterised by a small number of very large libraries at the top end of the scale - and a consequent tendency for 'means' to be distorted. For this reason, 'medians' are in most instances a better indicator of the average.

Quantifying user numbers

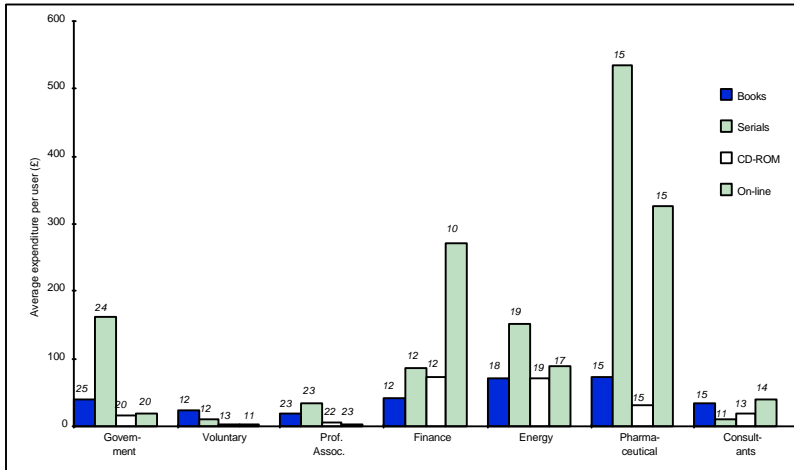
There is a difficulty in quantifying numbers of users in workplace libraries. We want to know about library use by the staff of the organisation (on one or more sites), but also about several varieties of external use:

- by external members (eg in the *Libraries in the workplace* survey, 92% of professional associations served these)
- by external clients (82% of government departments and 75% of financial libraries served these groups)
- and by members of the public (69% of voluntary libraries served these).

Those who fund workplace libraries are also interested in the numbers of 'regular users' of library/information services, in relation to the numbers targeted for use. In fact, 'regular users' is probably the more meaningful figure. In *Libraries in the workplace*, the median numbers of users targeted varied from 13,000 for professional associations to 300 for voluntary organisations. The percentage of regular library users to targeted users varied between 46% in government and 24% in professional associations.

Once established, user data may be constructively linked with other information - for instance, Figure 1 depicts 'average expenditure per regular user' across the sectors. There are clear differences between the sectors, in overall levels of expenditure and in the relative levels on the four expenditure components listed. Pharmaceutical libraries are the most intensive spenders, with serials by far the largest component. Financial libraries are the next highest spenders, though in their case most expenditure goes on on-line sources. The voluntary sector is the only one where the largest expenditure element is books.

Fig 1: Average expenditure per regular user



Whole sector estimates

Whole sector estimates of key data (on staff, stock and services) are of particular interest to suppliers. But moving from the analysed sample data to a whole sector estimate is a step fraught with complications, and the final estimates may be fairly crude. There are two main problems: establishing the number of organisations in a sector (as already mentioned); and knowing whether the sample is representative of the sector as a whole- especially if a large sector is represented by a small sample.

Each sector throws up its own problems, which need to be separately addressed. For instance the UK energy sector is relatively small, but its components are diversifying so rapidly that it is difficult to pin down which institutions/libraries should be included. In the legal sector, there are very large numbers of law firms - all with collections of information materials, but often run on a part-time basis by office managers, rather than treated as ‘libraries’. In the voluntary sector, there are even larger numbers of small agencies, many of which do not have a ‘library/information centre’ as such, although the agencies’ work is principally concerned with the transmission of information. Such problems soon lead surveyors of workplace libraries to ask themselves: *What is a library?*

When we reach the ‘whole sector estimate’ stage, the importance of initially choosing the right sampling frame becomes all too clear. Ideally, we need the fullest possible list of *institutions* in the sector, rather than a list of known

libraries. Lists of the latter from associations of library/information specialists within sectors tend to under-represent those organisations without qualified personnel - though they may have substantial resources. But the temptation to use such lists as sampling frames is strong, because the libraries listed in them are more likely to respond to questionnaires. And as anyone who has surveyed workplace libraries will confirm, one soon becomes desperate to *get a response* - by whatever means.

When sampling frame problems are resolved, the actual grossing up process is relatively straight-forward. The example in Table 2, from the pharmaceutical sector, shows how this was done for the *Libraries in the workplace* survey.

Table 2: Grossing up

Pharmaceutical libraries	
Estimated no. organisations	100
Survey % with no library	7.2%
Estimated no. libraries	93
Survey respondents	32
Grossing up factor	2.9

The estimated numbers of libraries within the nine UK sectors covered by the *Workplace* survey are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Estimated numbers of libraries in sectors

Government departments	60
Government (others)	379
Voluntary agencies	1,390
Professional associations	220
Legal libraries	1,400
Finance	211
Energy	83
Pharmaceutics	93
Management consultants	223

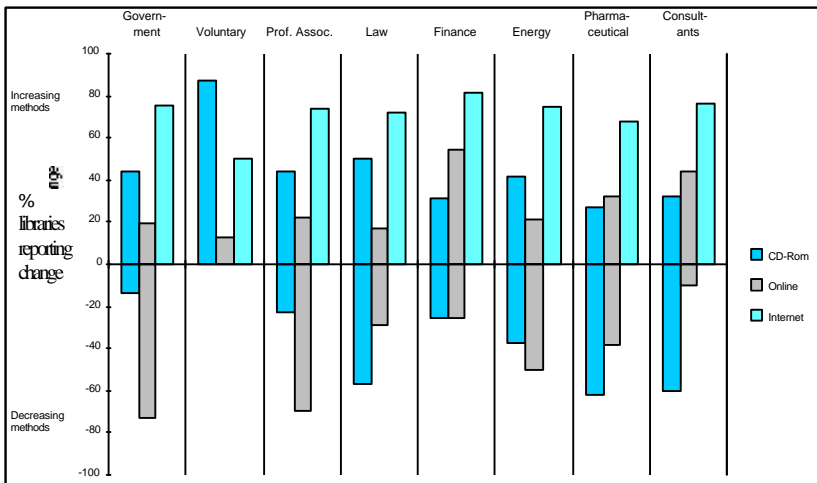
Trends

Because surveys of workplace libraries are rare, the missing factor has been information about trends. The TFPL data, which relate to both 1994 and 1996, provide the start of a time series. In the *Libraries in the workplace* survey, the 285 respondents were asked if they would be willing to complete a more limited questionnaire - covering key data - on an annual basis, and an encouraging number of 135 of them (47%) said that they would. The first of the follow-up

questionnaires were sent out in January 1999. It should now be possible to establish a panel of libraries making annual returns, and to carry out trend analysis over an extended period.

In the meantime, some indication of trends was obtained in the initial survey by questions asking whether budgets, staffing, acquisitions, etc were fluctuating. For instance, Figure 2 depicts, by sector, responses to a question about which of the various electronic methods of access to databases were ‘increasing’ or ‘decreasing’ most rapidly.

Fig 2: Changing methods of database access



There were some interesting features. Internet sources were frequently mentioned as ‘increasing in use’, as might be expected. The use of CD-ROMs was also increasing in many sectors, but in both pharmaceutical and management consultant libraries it was decreasing more than increasing. Perhaps the most revealing feature was on-line services. One might expect them to be the main casualty of increased Internet use, and in some sectors this was the case; but amongst management consultant, financial and voluntary libraries use of on-line services was increasing more than decreasing. The message seems to be that there are no straightforward patterns for the use of information materials, and that each medium finds its own level in specific situations.

Workplace learning in the corporate sector

Finally, a brief mention of a survey carried out for the UK Library Association, on library support for workplace learning in the UK corporate sector. UK commercial enterprises are placing an increasing emphasis upon the personal and professional development of their employees, and recent UK government initiatives may accelerate this process. The Library and Information Statistics Unit surveyed the UK's top 250 companies - the majority of them large manufacturers. A telephone survey proved to be suited to the task, for two reasons: first, it helped to establish which unit handled the learning support functions in the companies (47% of the 250 companies reporting that they had *no* library or information centre); and secondly, a dialogue between interviewer and interviewee was right for the complex subject matter of the questionnaire.

A total of 61 companies provided detailed information, and confirmed that a wide range of employee development schemes was supported by the companies. But the library/information support function for the schemes was complex and somewhat confusing - with 20% of companies having a library which did not support employee development, 15% giving limited support, and 13% full support. Another development was the growth of resource centres (or learning centres) supporting employee development, but managed by personnel officers rather than library/information staff; 21% of the 61 companies reported the existence of both a library and a resource centre - often with confused lines of responsibility and communication between them. The overall picture was one of missed opportunities for library/information services, and under-use of existing information skills by the organisations' managements. There were opportunities for closer liaison by all parties involved - to the potential benefit of their organisations.

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